

Fallen

by Singing Wolf

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Fallen By Sam Singing Wolf Email: SngngWolf@aol.com Rating: PG-13

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Fallen

The two men sat at a table in a dark corner, secure in their anonymity in the rundown corner bar. The tall man nodded his thanks to the disinterested waitress who brought them their beers. After a long minute spent staring at the bottle, he spoke.

"Sloan's not going to quit looking for me."

The shorter man took a long drink. "Relax. He doesn't suspect you."

He shook his head. "That's easy for you. It's not your butt on the line if he makes the connection. He's been asking too many questions."

A thoughtful pause. "Is he getting close?"

"I think so."

"Then kill him."

He lowered his eyes to the table, his gaze tracing the initials carved into the grime-coated surface. "I'm not comfortable with that," he muttered.

The other man snorted. "You sure as hell didn't have any problems having him tortured for information."

"That was different. It was business." He sounded defensive now.

"So's this."

"I know this guy... We've worked together..."

The other man shrugged as he stood. "Like you said, it's your ass. If it were me, I'd kill him."

He disappeared into the crowd, leaving the tall man alone at his table, contemplating his past sins, and the murder of a police lieutenant.

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"So, what can you tell me?"

"Somebody killed him."

Steve grinned at Amanda, for a change appreciating her grim sense of humor. "Cute." He took in her appearance, and raised an eyebrow. "You look terrible," he said.

She threw him a dirty look and the file in her hand. To her disgust, he caught it neatly. "So nice of you to notice." She turned back to the autopsy table, and the corpse lying on it. "See how you look after a sixteen hour shift in the morgue."

"No thanks." He set down the report without even glancing at its contents. "Come on, you can tell me all about it over a cup of coffee."

"Steve, I can't." She waved an arm around. "I've got work to do--"

"They're not going anywhere."

She gave him an exasperated look and shook her head. Then the words came out without her quite realizing it: "All right. But just a few minutes."

He grinned. "Good enough." He waited a moment while she removed her gown, gloves and cap, then held the door for her as they left the pathology lab.

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"I can't believe I let you talk me into this."

"Amanda, you said it yourself. You had been working sixteen hours straight. It was time to go home."

She looked at him over a cup of tea. She was curled up on her couch, in her pajamas, looking quite comfortable there. "So you just took it upon yourself to see that I did?"

He smiled at her. She looked so cute sitting there, her eyes half closed, her little fuzzy slippers encasing tiny feet... Her words finally penetrated. "Huh? Oh, yeah. Well, what are friends for?" He looked away for a few minutes. "So, what's on TV tonight?" he finally asked as he reached for the remote.

When she didn't answer, he turned back. She was sound asleep, her knees tucked up under her chin, leaning against the back of the couch. He smiled again. "Amanda?" He whispered softly. "Amanda, that can't be comfortable."

She didn't move a muscle. He sighed and gently brushed a stray lock of hair back from her face. He watched as a soft smile curved her lips. He carefully picked her up as if she weighed no more than a feather, and carried her into her bedroom. He laid her in her bed and tucked the covers around her. She never so much as opened her eyes.

"Goodnight, Amanda," he whispered. He was walking towards the door when he tripped over a cardboard box. He winced as he looked quickly back at Amanda. She was still sleeping peacefully. He sighed in relief, and glanced down at the offending box. It looked like one of Ron's, overflowing with FBI files. A couple of LAPD files caught his eye, but he shook his head, restraining his natural curiosity. Whatever Ron was working on was certainly none of his business, was it?

He continued out to the living room and began picking up a little bit. He put her teacup away in the kitchen, then let himself out the front door, locking it behind him.

He sat in his truck for a little while, looking back at her house. The yard was neatly trimmed as always, flowers artistically arranged by a professional landscape artist, no doubt. It looked like Amanda: elegant, tasteful, understated and classic. All the things he was not. With an irritated shake of his head, he drove away.

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"Hey Ron," Steve called by way of greeting as he poked his head in Ron's office.

"What do you want, Sloan?" Ron growled.

Steve straightened. "What's eating you?"

He sighed and ran a hand over his face. "Nothing. I'm sorry, come on in. Sit down." He motioned to the chair across from his desk. "What can I do for you, Steve?"

"For starters, you can tell me what's wrong."

Ron stared at him for a moment. "Amanda broke off our relationship." He said abruptly.

"Oh. I'm sorry, Ron. I didn't know."

"She said I've become moody. 'Impossible to live with,' she said." He shrugged and looked back down at his paperwork.

An uncomfortable silence fell between them. Finally, Ron looked back up. "You didn't come here to listen to me complain about my love life. What do you need?"

Before he could respond, another agent entered the office, placing a report on the desk. Ron nodded his thanks. "Gary, this is Lieutenant Steve Sloan of the LAPD. Steve, I don't know if you remember Agent Gary Shelton. He's one of our best."

Steve smiled and rose to shake the agent's hand. "Gary. Sorry, name doesn't ring a bell."

Shelton returned the greeting amiably. "No problem. I don't think we were ever formally introduced."

Steve nodded and looked back at Ron. "It's about the Russell Dale case."

Agent Shelton stopped at the doorway and turned back to listen to the conversation. Steve glanced at him, then gave Ron a questioning look.

Ron waved a hand. "It's okay. Gary was on that case from the beginning. Besides, the case is closed. We successfully prosecuted him on money laundering charges. The wife is safely in the Witness Relocation Program."

"But we never caught the guy who set me up."

"That's easy. It was somebody the cartel hired to help their guy out. No big mystery."

"But they couldn't have known where we were keeping Mrs. Dane the first time. It had to have been a cop."

"Sloan, we've been through this before--"

"I've found him."

Shelton interrupted. "You what?"

Steve looked back at him. "I did a check on spectators who attended the trial every day. One of them, a man named Eduardo Ramirez has known connections to the cartel. He was probably their liaison for Dane. I've traced back several telephone calls from him to someone at the FBI."

Ron shook his head. "One of ours? That's not possible..."

Steve tossed a large envelope on the desk. "See for yourself. The phone records are clear. The problem is, the calls came through the main switchboard, not to a direct line. What I need to know is, can we find out who those calls were transferred to?"

Ron picked up the envelope. "Maybe," he said doubtfully. "I'll see

what I can do."

"That's all I ask." He stopped at the door. Agent Shelton was still standing there, his expression unreadable. Steve looked back at his friend. "Listen Ron, I'm sorry about you and Amanda."

"Yeah, me too."

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BBQ Bob's was empty. There had been a decent crowd tonight, Steve mused as he waved a goodnight to Shelly. He didn't know what he'd do without her. She was by far the best waitress in town. He finished removing the money from the till, filling a bank deposit bag. He'd drop it off on his way home. With a last look around the place, he walked around the bar, pulling his keys out of his pocket.

Without warning, the door flew open, and a young man ran in, a sawed-off shotgun in hand. Steve threw himself behind the bar just as the kid opened fire. He felt pain lance his side, even as he drew his weapon. But the pain became a secondary concern as another sound drew his attention.

"Steve?" Amanda's voice rang out from the kitchen. "There'd better be some coffee on, mister! I've had a \*really\* bad day."

"Amanda, get down!" He shouted.

He heard her scream as the man fired again. Steve ducked, then stood to return fire.

His first shot hit his target. The man fell, the shotgun clattering next to him. Steve stood slowly, his gun still ready. Reaching him, he kicked the weapon aside, then knelt to check for a pulse. He found none.

"Steve?" Amanda peeked out around the corner. "Are you all right?"

He nodded, still gazing down at the gunman. He couldn't be more than 16 or 17, he thought despondently. Amanda hurried to his side.

"No, you're not. Steve, sit down. I'm going to call a ambulance."

He gave her a puzzled look, then followed her gaze to his side. His tan shirt was covered with blood. As he looked, a dull ache began to spread throughout his abdomen. He took a ragged breath.

Amanda guided him to a chair and he sat heavily. She looked around. "Where's the phone? I've got to call--" she broke off as she saw the phone sitting on the bar. After a quick call to 911, she returned.

"Steve? How are you doing?" She pressed a couple of clean napkins to his side. He gasped in pain.

"Okay," he muttered. He turned his head to look her in the eye. "What are you doing here?"

"I came for coffee."

He nodded and closed his eyes. The room was starting to spin at a rather alarming rate, and it was easier if he couldn't see it.

"Steve?"

"What?"

"You still awake?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"You had me worried. For a minute there, you were starting to look like one of my regular patients."

He couldn't help it, he laughed. More of a chuckle really, but it still hurt like hell. He didn't say so, but his expression must have said it for him. He felt her hand on his forehead, blessedly cool.

"Sorry," her whispered apology sounded contrite and more than a little scared.

He managed a small reassuring smile just before he passed out.

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"No, Mark, Steve wouldn't want you to fly back here, not in the weather you're having. Dr. Torell says he'll be fine. They're going to release him tomorrow afternoon, probably. They removed eight pieces of shot from his side and a couple from his forearm." Amanda paused to listen to a worried father. "It could've been much worse, Mark. I'll keep an eye on him, I promise." She smiled. "Yes, Mark. I'll tell him. And I'll have him call you as soon as he's up to it. At least try to enjoy the rest of the conference, okay? Say hi to Jesse for me." Good-byes were exchanged, and finally she hung up the phone. She wasn't certain that Mark Sloan wouldn't still try to fly back from Florida, but she thought she most likely had him talked out of it.

She wandered back to Steve's room. He was still sleeping, although no longer under the effects of the anesthetic. He looked young, almost boyish in his sleep, and Amanda couldn't resist smoothing his hair back from his forehead. When she laid her hand against his cheek, he turned his head slightly to nestle his face into her palm. She smiled.

She settled into a chair positioned near his bed. As she watched him sleep, her mind wandered and she remembered all the times he had been there for her; protecting her and holding her when she was afraid. She would be there for him when he woke up.

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"Hey, Amanda," Steve called as he entered Dr. Bentley's office. A few days had passed, and he was back at work, albeit driving a desk. The trashcan next to the doorway caught his eye; a bouquet of flowers was wilting there, upside down. "Anything on the Kay autopsy?" He asked

distractedly as he eyed the wilted roses. But he soon found his gaze drawn back to the lovely doctor.

She glanced up at him over her glasses. "Kay? Oh, George Kay..." She put down the file she was looking at and rummaged around her desk until she picked up another. "Let's see... George Kay, Caucasian male, age 42, cause of death, two gunshot wounds to the head..." She looked up suddenly. "What's that look for?"

His eyes opened wide as he raised his eyebrows. The picture of innocence. "What look?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You had a strange look on your face."

He just raised his shoulders slightly as if to say, "I don't know what you're talking about."

She looked at him suspiciously a moment longer, then looked back down to continue reading. Steve grinned widely at the top of her head.

"Point of entry indicates shooter was in two different places when he fired each shot," she said.

"Confirming the reports that it was a drive by."

She nodded. "Looks like." She looked back at the report. "9mm hollow point rounds, not at close range, and not much else for you."

He shrugged. "I expected as much. Thanks anyway." He cleared his throat as he nodded towards the dying roses. "From Ron?"

"It's over. He can't buy me back with flowers."

"Amanda..."

"Ever since he came back from London, he's been different. I thought he came back early to be with me, but he's been distant and moody." She gave a sharp shake of her head. "Look, I appreciate your concern, Steve, but I don't want to talk about it, okay?" She said rather harshly.

He didn't miss a beat as he continued, "...you want to have dinner with me?"

She looked up at him, caught totally off guard. "What?"

"Come on. With dad and Jesse out of town, everything's too quiet. We could go by Bob's..."

"I'm not really dressed to go out," she protested lamely.

"Then I'll pick up dinner and a video, and we'll go to my place. It'll be fun. I think we could both use the company."

She stood there a moment, just staring at him. Then she shook herself mentally. He was right; the company of a good friend was just what she needed right now. And that's Steve, she told herself. He's just playing big brother. "Okay," she said aloud. "I'll meet you there in an hour." She went back to her reports as he headed for the door.

"And Steve..."

He turned back. "Yes?"

She smiled warmly. "Thanks for caring."

He returned the smile. "Anytime."

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"Wow. That was great."

"I figured I couldn't go wrong with Chinese food with you."

She laughed. "No, that's usually a safe bet."

Steve refilled her wineglass, then his own.

"So," she ventured. "How's work going?"

He took a sip of the burgundy. "Not bad. I think I'm finally getting somewhere finding the leak in the department."

Her face darkened at the memory of that terrible time, when they all thought Steve had been dead. She stared into her glass.

"Amanda?"

She looked up at him, tears in her eyes. "Steve, we were so scared. When Mark brought you in to the ER--"

He set their glasses on the table and gently took her hand. "What?" He asked quietly.

Her voice was barely a whisper. "We didn't think we were going to be able to save you. The paramedics and Mark had been keeping you alive with CPR on the way in, and Jesse had to--" She took a deep breath. "You coded twice on us, Steve. The injuries we saw, and the deliberate drug overdose--"

Steve closed his eyes and sighed. It made sense now. The haunted look in his father's eyes when he looked at him, the way he hovered over him during his recovery. Jesse, badgering him to take just a few more days before returning to work. He had no idea it had been so close, but he understood why Mark hadn't told him. It wasn't something that just came up in casual dinner conversation.

He looked back at Amanda. He reached out, and with tender fingers, wiped a tear from her cheek. "Amanda..."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry..."

He placed a finger to her lips. "No, there's nothing to be sorry for." He looked into her eyes, trying to read the emotions he saw there. She returned the gaze, her own eyes wide and searching.

Slowly, he lowered his head and his lips found the place his fingertip had been only a moment before. He kissed her gently, his movements tentative and questioning.

Her own response was sudden and unexpected. She returned his kiss with an intensity that surprised him. The flood of emotions he felt was nearly overwhelming.

For a brief moment, reason took over and Steve pulled back from the passionate kiss. "Amanda, I'm sorry," he whispered.

She stared at him, her breathing uneven, and tried to keep up with this sudden change of heart. "For what? You have nothing to be sorry for," she said, unconsciously echoing his earlier words.

"But Ron--"

She placed her hand against his cheek, understanding. "--Is your friend, I know. But this has nothing to do with him. You didn't cause the problems in our relationship, he did. What we had, is over. This is between you and me, no one else."

"It's just..."

"I know." She leaned towards him. "We're all adults, Steve. Free to make our own choices. I've made mine..." She pressed her lips to his. He didn't stop her.

His left hand moved up to cradle her head, his fingers twining in her hair. His other arm wrapped possessively around her shoulders, pulling her closer. She wrapped both arms around his waist, her fingers exploring the skin stretched tautly across hard muscle.

"What the hell is going on here?"

They looked up to see Ron standing in the doorway. Emotion flitted across his face: hurt, anger, and embarrassment.

"Ron..." Amanda whispered. Steve lowered his eyes briefly.

He stood there, just staring at the two. His icy glare focused on Steve. "I came by to drop off the information you wanted." He did so literally, letting the folder fall from his outstretched fingers to the floor. Then he turned and slammed out the door.

For almost a full minute, the two sat there in silence, staring at the closed door. Then Amanda got up, picking up her coat and purse. "I should go..."

Steve stood as well. "Amanda..."

She shook her head, not looking him in the eyes. "No, I think I need to go. This can't work, not tonight, not like this." She looked at the floor. "I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" Without waiting for an answer, she hurried out the door.

Steve sat heavily on the couch. His mind was reeling, not only from Ron's sudden appearance and outburst, but from his own turbulent emotions. The intensity of his feelings for Amanda had surprised even him. He grabbed his jacket and headed out to the beach. He too, needed some time alone to think.

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Two hours later, Steve looked through the phone records Ron had brought. When he'd come back in from the beach, he was surprised to see the file lying on the floor. In all the commotion, he had forgotten about it.

It seemed to be very little help. The extension the calls had been transferred to were used by more than two dozen agents, Ron among them. Then a name caught his eye, and Steve wondered why he hadn't seen the possibility before. He had been on the case originally, and had shown a great deal of interest in the evidence Steve had brought to the Federal Building today.

Special Agent Gary Shelton.

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"So that's why you broke it off? Because of \*him\*?" Ron's voice was filled with contempt as he stood in the doorway of her office.

Amanda removed her glasses with a sigh. "Ron, I know you're hurting, but please. I gave you my reasons. Frankly, I'm tired of you thinking you know more about what's best for me than I do. This is my life, and I've made my decision."

He walked towards her until he was only inches away. For the first time since she'd known him, she actually felt a little intimidated by him. She resisted the urge to stand as well, and put some distance between them.

"How long have you two been sleeping together behind my back?"

Her eyes widened and then she did stand, slapping him soundly across the face as she did so. "You bastard," she hissed. "How dare you?"

He gazed at her through eyes narrowed with rage. He grabbed her roughly by the shoulders and snarled, "This isn't over by a long shot, Amanda."

She struggled to break free, but his grip was too strong. "Yes, it is Ron. It's over!" She was nearly shouting. Finally he let her go and she leapt away from him. They stood there, staring at each other. When the phone rang, Amanda nearly jumped out of her skin. Glad for the reprieve, she snatched up the receiver.

"Dr. Bentley," she answered. "Steve!" She quickly looked up at Ron as she spoke without thinking. He was clearly furious at the coincidence that his rival would be calling now. However, Steve's words finally got her attention and she ignored the FBI agent as she began jotting notes on a memo pad. "318 South 82nd, apartment E. First floor? Okay. How many bodies do you have? All right, I'm on my way." She hung up the phone and brushed past Ron. "I've got to get to a crime scene," she said. She stopped at the door, turning to face him. "I'm sorry it turned out this way, Ron. I really am. But we both have to accept that it's over."

He watched her walk out of the office, searching for the right words

to say, something... anything, if it would bring her back. He could only stand there in silence.

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--Like he's been dead for maybe two or three hours, probably died before the woman. I'll have to do a full autopsy to--"

"Amanda--"

She ignored Steve's attempts to talk to her about anything other than the corpse at her feet, just as she had his earlier attempts when she'd arrived at the crime scene. "The woman is an interesting case though. The markings on her abdomen indicate--"

Finally, he took her hand. "I know. You told me already."

She looked up at him, meeting his eyes for the first time since she'd arrived. "I did?" she asked, abashed.

He nodded. "Twice." He looked around. "Look, there's nothing more we can do here, why don't we go talk?"

"I don't think--"

He began pulling her towards his truck. "You see, I think we \*should\* talk. I've got this friend, she's always telling me not to bottle things up. She says I never show my feelings. So I'm trying to take her advice." He grinned at her. "You do think it's good advice, don't you?"

She scowled at him, knowing he was mocking her own words. "You know, I hate it when you do that."

He only grinned wider, and opened the truck door for her. He pulled out of the parking lot, a blue Isuzu pickup pulling out close behind. After they were on the road, his smile slowly faded, and silence fell between them.

"Well?" She prompted.

He glanced over at her. "Last night was..."

He trailed off, and she waited anxiously for him to continue. Last night was what? A mistake? Did he regret what had happened-- had almost happened between them? Did she?

He slowed the truck to a halt at a stoplight. He looked over at her, his eyes seeming impossibly blue in the sunlight glinting through the windshield.

"We've been friends for a long time, Amanda. You probably know me as well as anyone." He sighed. "This isn't easy for me--"

The blaring of a car horn interrupted. He looked forward to see the light was green and the man in the car behind them was shouting obscenities. Steve managed to curb his temper for once and drove on, still neither of them aware of the danger that was following.

"Steve, I--" Amanda broke off in horror as the back window shattered in an explosion of glass. She heard Steve shouting something she couldn't hear past the ringing in her ears. He was pushing her down against the seat, trying to give her some of the protection afforded by the metal cab of the truck. Shots continued to ring out as the other truck pulled up beside them, the driver leveling a .45 at Steve.

Steve swerved sharply, sending his truck careening into the other. The driver lost control of his vehicle and came to a sudden stop as he hit a light post.

Steve slammed on the brakes and looked anxiously at Amanda. "Are you all right?" He held her face in his hands gently as he visually examined her for injuries.

She nodded slowly. "I think so."

He stared at her for a moment longer, assuring himself that she was indeed unhurt, then drew his gun and leapt out of the truck. Amanda quickly followed.

By the time she caught up with him, Steve had dragged the other man, bleeding profusely from a gash on his forehead, out of the demolished Isuzu.

"Who sent you?" He shouted.

The man shook his head, still stunned. He was young, and clearly terrified. Steve shoved his gun under the man's chin. "You've got exactly three seconds to tell me who hired you." His eyes were cold. "One... two..."

Amanda picked up the man's cell phone. "Steve, wait!" She called. He looked over at her halting his count for the moment. The man he still held tightly in his grasp nearly fainted with relief. "Remember the 'callback' feature?"

He walked towards her, dragging the man along with him. "Where we can find out who called him last?"

She nodded as she punched the button. Placing the phone to her ear, she listed for a moment, while Steve waited impatiently. The man looked even more nervous, if such a thing was possible.

Amanda looked up at Steve. "It's my office..." she said, confused. "Why would his boss be calling from my office?" She shook her head. "No one was there but me and Ron..." Her eyes widened as understanding dawned. "No, it can't be..." she whispered. She and Steve stared at each other in shock.

A patrol car pulled up and Steve quickly identified himself to the officer, who was understandably distressed by the scene before him. In only minutes, the suspect was in the back of the officer's car, and Steve was heading back to his truck. Amanda caught up to him as he was wrenching open the battered door.

"Where are you going?"

He turned and looked down at her. His eyes burned with anger,

betrayal, and pain. "I have to find him. I have to know the truth."

"I'm coming with you," she said, her tone brooking no argument.

He shook his head. "Forget it, Amanda. I want you to go with Officer Hale back to the station. He'll have someone take you home."

"I'm not going home." She lifted her chin stubbornly. "I'm going with you."

He climbed into the truck without another word and turned the ignition. Ignoring her protests, he drove away.

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Steve gripped the wheel in his hands and cursed under his breath. How could Ron betray them like this? He grabbed his cell phone and dialed a number.

"Federal Bureau of Investigation, how may I direct your call?"

"Special Agent Ron Wagner," he requested, his voice tight.

"One moment." Silence filled the line as Steve pushed his truck faster. "I'm sorry, Agent Wagner has left for the day. May I put you through to his voice mail?"

"No thanks." He hung up abruptly. Ron must have gone home. Wherever he had gone, Steve intended to find him.

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Amanda watched the taxi drive away, wondering if she had done the right thing by returning home. She wished Steve had let her go with him, she was certain he shouldn't be dealing with this situation on his own. She reached into her purse for her keys, her hands shaking as she unlocked the door. She still couldn't believe it. She knew Ron. He was a self-centered egotist, but she couldn't believe he would have had Steve killed.

Her house was dark and quiet. Nervously, she flipped on the hall light, then the living room lights as she passed through. By the time she reached the bedroom, nearly all the lights in the house were on. She felt silly, but made no move to turn them off.

When she walked into the bathroom, she inhaled the familiar scents of raspberry and vanilla. Turning on the bathtub, she undressed quickly, anticipating the warm water relaxing her sore muscles. She sighed deeply as she stepped into the bath.

"You look beautiful."

Amanda gasped as she turned and tried to cover herself. Ron stood in the doorway, a smile on his face and a gun in his hand.

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Steve slammed his fist on the steering wheel. "Damn it, where could

he be?" He stared out the front window, not really seeing the landscape before him. He had checked everywhere he could think of: Ron's apartment, his health club, even BBQ Bob's. He was nowhere to be found. The Bureau had no idea where he was. He'd tried his cell phone numerous times.

He started the truck, and headed for Amanda's house. Maybe she would have a better idea of where he may have gone. Besides, he thought a bit ashamedly, he needed to apologize for his earlier behavior. He should never have left her like he did.

When he pulled into Amanda's drive, he was relieved to see the soft glow of lights through the curtains. Officer Hale must have seen her home. He walked slowly up to the door, not relishing the idea of admitting he was wrong. He could already hear the "I told you so," in her voice. He knocked tentatively on the front door, smiling when he heard her call for him to enter. She was expecting him.

He crossed the hall to the living room. She was sitting on the couch in a bathrobe. Her hands were folded in her lap, her face pensive.

"Amanda, I'm sorry about earlier--" He broke off as he felt a presence behind him. He whirled, his left hand already reaching for his gun.

"I wouldn't." Ron's voice was deadly, and his gun was pointed at Steve's head. He froze. "Carefully... drop it on the floor and kick it over here."

Steve followed the instructions, his face tight with anger. "Let Amanda go, Wagner. This is between us."

"It should have been. But you had to drag her into this, didn't you?" He shook his head. "I knew you'd come back here. To your lover." He spat the last contemptuously.

"Ron... Don't do this, please," Amanda pleaded. Steve glanced back to see her slowly rise to her feet. "Please, we can talk about this..."

Ron snorted. "Yeah, right. We can all just walk away and forget this ever happened, right? I don't think Sloan sees it the same way, do you Sloan?" He sneered at Steve. "No, you're just like your father, always the hero, can't see how a man might have to make some difficult choices."

"You violated your oath, Ron. You kill a man, nearly cost an innocent woman her life, had me tortured-- and for what? Money?"

He nodded. "You better believe it. I give them eleven years of my life, and when I finally get the assignment I wanted, they pull me off it before I've even had a chance to prove myself. Accuse me of not being suitable for the job. That's bullshit. That assignment in London was my ticket to an Assistant Director position, and they took it away from me." His voice was bitter. "My career was finished. I had to do something."

Steve raised his chin. "So you betray your country \*and\* your friends. Great choice."

Ron took another step towards him, his expression livid. His finger tightened on the trigger. "Shut up! You don't know what it's like! You have no idea what I've gone through!"

"Ron, please don't..." Amanda pleaded.

He shifted his weapon to her chest, his face contorted with rage as he shouted at her. "Don't!? What right do you have to ask for anything from me, you adulterous bitch!"

Steve grabbed for the gun, pulling the muzzle down towards the floor. With his free hand, he punched Ron in the jaw, sending him stumbling. He heard Amanda scream as they both tumbled to the floor, smacking the hard wood.

The gun clattered across the floor as Steve struck out again. Ron wrenched himself away and scrambled to his feet, even as Steve's left hand shot out and seized his ankle. He expected him to fall but he didn't. He twisted in his grasp and his other foot impacted with the side of Steve's face.

Pain exploded behind his eyes and he tasted blood. He could feel the blood streaming out of his mouth and nose as he lay there, trying to order his numb body to move. Every instinct screamed at him to do something, anything. He struggled to his knees and shook his head to clear it.

Ron kicked out again, this time catching him in the ribs. Steve groaned as he fell back and rolled to avoid another assault. But, instead of rolling away, he turned towards Ron, driving against the other man's knees and knocking him down.

Steve wrenched the agent's arms up behind his back and snapped on his handcuffs. Ron continued to struggle, shouting incoherently. Steve pulled away, panting for breath, and staring at the man he had once considered a friend.

Amanda approached him and reached out gingerly to his cheek, wincing with him at her light touch. Ron fell silent, sullen eyes staring back at them both. Amanda studiously kept her gaze from him, and looked up at Steve. "Are you okay?" She asked softly, her voice shaking with emotion.

He just nodded and put his arms around her trembling shoulders. "It's over, Amanda. This time it's really over."

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"Mind if I sit down?"

Steve looked up to see Jesse standing by his table. "Hey Jess. Sure, have a seat." He waved his beer bottle in the general direction of the chair across from him. "What brings you down here? I didn't think this was your kind of place."

Jesse looked around a little nervously. "Well, it's not really. I came looking for you. Your dad told me I might find you here."

"Uh-huh." He took a long drink of his beer and waved at the waitress.  
"Two more, please."

She smiled at him and headed for the bar. Jesse smiled tentatively.  
"So, uh... Florida was nice," he ventured.

"Glad to hear it."

He looked around. "Uh, Mark told me what happened." He smiled up at the waitress as she brought them the beers. Steve just stared at the table while she picked up the money he'd set there and walked away. Jesse watched him down nearly half the bottle. "You okay?" he asked hesitantly.

"I'm fine, Jess."

He cleared his throat. "No offense Steve, but you don't look fine. I know I wouldn't be fine if I were you. I mean, Ron tried to kill you! You-- we, we trusted that guy. And Amanda... Well, she has to be devastated."

Steve looked up then. It was clear he'd had several beers before the young doctor had arrived. The walls were down, and his eyes were full of pain and loneliness. Jesse shook his head as he pushed his own bottle aside. "I mean, well, I'm sure Amanda just needs some time, that's all. She really cares about you, you know. I'll bet that if she just takes some time to think about what she really wants, and has some time to get over Ron and what happened... You two will work things out."

Steve sighed. "I'm just tired, Jess. I'm really tired."

Jesse reached out and placed a hand on his friend's arm. "I know, Steve. I know you love her." Steve looked at him. "She loves you too, you know. Give her some time. In the meantime, you're still friends," he added helpfully.

"I won't risk our friendship, it's too important to me."

"Neither will she. It'll all work out in the end." He grinned. "Trust me." He stood and reached out a hand. "Come on, let me drive you home."

Steve stood, keeping one hand braced on the table for support.  
"Thanks Jess. For being here for me."

"Hey, what are friends for?"

End

Feedback more than welcome, and quickly responded to at  
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End  
file.